



VDTR Workshop

“Thinking Through Dolls: Religious Studies, Anthropological and Artistic Approaches to Human Simulacra”

Friday 9th June, 2023, Dekanatssaal der Katholisch-Theologischen Fakultät, Universitätsring 1,
Staircase 8, 2nd floor

10:00-10:15 Welcoming Address by Prof. Lukas Pokorny
Opening Remarks by Fabio Gygi and Alisha Saikia

10:15-11:25 Panel 1: Dolls of the World : Austria. West Africa and Cuba

Dirk Schuster: Dolls in the State Collection of Lower Austria: A Review and Presentation.

The State Collections of Lower Austria have over 6 million objects from a wide variety of areas such as art, history, natural sciences and more. This also includes the 'historic toys' collection area. This in turn includes several objects that can be classified as 'historical dolls'. The paper gives an insight into the provenance of these objects. The aim is to show how objects of this type came into the Lower Austrian state collections, what the intention was when taking over such objects, and in what way and in what context these objects were presented to the public. The background of such a scientific approach lies in the analysis of the changed way of looking at such objects, because the meaning and attribution to an object are never static. Rather, these objects are subject to a permanent change in perspective due to changing social processes. Accordingly, the paper wants to give an insight into the social perceptions and changes in the course of history towards such objects.

Hans Gerald Hödl: Twin Dolls in West Africa and Cuban Santería.

In the religion of Vodun as well as in Yorùbá Òrìṣà-worship, most of the deities (vodun/òrìṣà) traditionally have not been represented in a metaphorical way by statues or figurines, but metonymically by objects linked to their area of power or by figurines of their adepts, as is the case with the dance wands for Šàngó—the deity of atmospheric phenomena—used by his mediums. There are exceptions, and one of them is to be found in the cult of twins, in Yorùbá called Ibeyi (there is also a French-Cuban band called “Ibeyi” whose masterminds are twins of Yorùbá background and Venezuelan and Cuban descent). In my paper, I will a) give a sketch of the religious background of Vodun- and Òrìṣà-worship in West Africa and in the Caribbean. I will b) focus on the cult of twins in Yorùbáland, the Republic of Benin, and Togo—and the role of dolls therein. Furthermore I will c) compare the role of Ibeyi in Yorùbáland with their place as special Oricha in Cuban Santería. In both cases, they are represented by dolls, but in different ways.

11:25-11:50 Coffee Break

11:50-13:00 Panel 2: Dolls, Deaths and Funerals

Alisha Saikia: Death, Birth and Reincarnation of BID's.

Dolls have been an integral part of history, intricately woven into the cultural fabric of the society. The scope and use of dolls is not limited merely to a children's

plaything but a wide variety of dolls are also collected by adult doll collectors who explore spaces of healing, meditation and spirituality through doll play. The category of dolls collected by adult collectors that will be explored in this paper is called BJD (Ball Jointed Dolls).

The BJD collectors interact with their dolls through a process of bonding (affective relationship between the collectors and their dolls) and character creation. Some characters are created and developed after buying the dolls and some dolls are bought to embody the pre-existing characters within the mind of the collectors. But what happens when the collectors don't bond with their doll anymore? What happens when the character outgrows the body of the doll that embodies it and another doll is used to embody it instead? Can dolls with formidable characters actually be replaced? Do they go through a process of death, rebirth or reincarnation? This paper explores such questions with an extensive ethnographic research methodology focussing on the relationship between adult doll collecting and neo-animism.

Joseph Chadwin: A Case of Childhood Religiosity: An Ethnographic Presentation of Toy Funerals in Scotland.

The subject of children is widely discussed within the field of lived religion. It is therefore surprising that little consideration has been paid to how children themselves engage with and experience religion. Although it is somewhat common knowledge that children are amply capable of navigating their own religious beliefs and practices, it remains the case that scholars rarely acknowledge the contributions of children in the creation of their own lived religious spheres. This paper shall explore how very young children (aged between 3-4) negotiate beliefs pertaining to death and the afterlife through the lens of a toy funeral that took place in a Scottish spiritual community. It shall ultimately assert that children as young as three years old are capable of developing their own religious sphere that is informed by but crucially different to that of the adults in their lives.

13:00-14:30 Lunch

14:30-16:15 Panel 3: Dolls and their Souls

Linda Franca: The Souls of the Puppets- An Analogy to the Five Names of the Soul According to Jewish Traditional Sources.

Puppetry is full of metaphors. Those of the godlike man as creator, who animates and controls his creature, but also those of the godlike puppet, which exercises power over its human puppeteers, and those of the belief in the magic of the puppet, which can make it live, die and rise again. Magic is the ineffable and the indescribable. This magic also includes the belief in the soul of the puppet.

Jewish tradition offers a huge source for analogies through its macro-microcosmic and theological pattern of view. In the Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, an interpretation of the Book of Genesis, in chapter 14:9, the soul is called by five names: Nefesh, Ruach, Neshama, Chaya and Yechida. These names relate to different qualities and stages of improvement of the self. For Rabbi Isaac Luria, the names show a relation with specific worlds. He calls these worlds Assija, Yezira, Brija, Azilut and the highest Alion. If a person makes merit, his soul can ascend from the material world Assija to the spiritual levels. Applying this view in analogy to puppetry could show the ascending quality of a puppet's appearance and agency, what the author called "The souls of the puppet". The Nefesh stands for the material qualities, the Ruach for the relation that the puppeteer is able to establish to the puppet, the Neshama is than the emerging result. The Chaya appears on stage communicating with the audience and

the Yechida finally relates to the “texte generale” of mankind. In order to ascend the levels of the above-mentioned worlds, certain requirements have to be met.

Agnès Giard: Love Doll Shaped as Ghosts: Ritual Practices Around Human Simulacra for Adults in Japan.

In 1981, when the first pioneer love doll (rabu dōru) was released in Japan, the company Orient Industry told the media that “she” had been created upon request of a man mourning his wife. This love doll – promoted as “the shadow of a departed beloved spouse” – was launched in August, the month devoted to O-bon (the ritual celebration of the deceased ones), under the name of Omokage, a word meaning “trace”, or “remembrance”. Building on the ritual practices surrounding the making and the marketing of love dolls in Japan, I would like to tackle the reason why they are staged as something which has disappeared, or someone who has been lost... It may appear indeed strange that such products – supposedly designed to fill a need for a warm presence and commercialized on fake dating websites – are, in fact, modelled after ghosts. Investigating on this enigma will enable me to challenge the popular misconception that love dolls are made to replace women. Are love dolls substitutes for real humans?

Fabio Gygi: The Soul of the Doll: Apprehending Belief in Rites of Disposal in Contemporary Japan.

This paper explores two intertwined subjects: one is the doll as subject; that is, not just as research topic, but as an entity with a soul, a heart or a mind. The second, perhaps more elusive subject is the believing person, in other words, the person in whose mind the idea of the soul of the doll resides. Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork at ningyō kuyō (rites of disposal) all over Japan, I try to piece together an understanding of these rituals using ritual theory, some psychodynamic ideas and a material semiotics of animation.

16:15-16:45 Coffee Break

16:45-17:20 Interview with Victoria Nelson on her book The Secret Life of Puppets by Prof Hans Gerald Hödl

17:20-18:15 Break

18:15-20:15 Public Event: Keynote and Panel Discussion

Opening Remarks by Prof Gerhard Langer (VDTR)

Keynote by Prof Joe Moshenska: “Iconoclasm as Childs Play: Dolls and Idols in the Reformation”

The word 'iconoclasm' conjures to mind acts of burning and breaking, grim-faced figures wielding hammer and flame. In the sixteenth century, however, the desecration of formerly holy things could take a very different form: such objects were periodically placed in the hands of playing children. This lecture will argue that while this made a certain polemical sense - as a way of implying that traditional religion was inane and childish - such play was also a complex and volatile process. Once we understand the array of forces and discourses that coincided on such objects as they became toys, they can be seen as both fascinating anomalies, and exemplary of the competing values that playthings embody as they fluctuate between idol and doll.

Thinking Through Dolls - Panel Discussion by Lisa Zingerle (Schubert Theatre Wien), Fabio Gygi and Alisha Saikia (Moderated by Katharina Limacher)

Closing Remarks